

# **DANIEL BARENBOIM AND THE EAST-WEST DIVAN ORCHESTRA: THE POLITICS OF BEING APOLITICAL**

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This presentation was prompted by a recent concert in Berlin (August, 2008) by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, an ensemble comprised of young musicians from Israel, Spain and various Arab nations in the middle East. The orchestra was founded in 1999 by internationally acclaimed pianist-conductor Daniel Barenboim and the late Edward Said, a noted literary theorist, cultural critic and ardent supporter of the Palestinian cause. The 2008 Berlin concert was a part of the orchestra's annual summer tour during which they had performed in Madrid, London, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Paris. A performance at the Ravello Festival in Italy replaced a concert in Amman, Jordan that had to be cancelled due to security concerns.

The idea of creating an orchestra made up predominantly of young musicians from Jewish and Islamic countries was the fruit of a warm friendship that had developed between Barenboim and Said after their serendipitous meeting in London in the early 1990s. In addition to a shared love of music--Said was in fact quite a fine amateur pianist--the two men held surprisingly similar views on the essential nature of long-standing tensions between Israel and the rest of the Middle East, particularly between Israel and Palestine. The orchestra came together for the first time in Weimar, Germany in the summer of 1999 and eventually found a permanent home in Seville, Spain and since 2004 has been under the umbrella of the Barenboim-Said Foundation centered also in Spain.

The gist of this view can be found in the following excerpt from Barenboim's controversial speech on the occasion of being awarded the Wolf Prize by the Israeli Knesset in 2004:

Can the State of Israel allow itself an unrealistic dream of an ideological end to the conflict instead of pursuing a pragmatic, humanitarian one based on social justice?...I have always believed that there is no military solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict, neither from a moral nor a strategic one...

Barenboim continued by noting that he and Said had formulated the concept of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra project from this very mindset: given that military, moral and strategic solutions were impossible, there was no good reason to delay any longer to implement measures of a humanitarian and pragmatic nature. He concluded the speech by announcing that he would be donating the prize money to music education projects in both Israel and Palestine; by so doing he accomplished the unthinkable outcome of diverting Israeli funds to the benefit of young people in Palestine.

Barenboim's action in this case could be labeled, to paraphrase Thoreau, a kind of "musical disobedience", an approach that has become one of his hallmarks over the years. For example, Barenboim broke the longstanding taboo against performing Wagner's music in Israel during a concert with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra at the 2001 Jerusalem Festival. Then in 2005 he brought the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra to give a concert in Ramallah, Palestine only a few miles from Jerusalem in spite of the fact that they have never been allowed to perform in Israel.

Often questioned on how the West-East Divan Orchestra could possibly have any effect on the Israeli-Arab problem, Barenboim gives a consistently puzzling answer: it cannot, and it should not. With a philosophy that has a somewhat Taoist ring to it, Barenboim insists that the orchestra's *raison d'être* is not for what it can *do*, but rather what it can *be*. And what it can be is a working model of the theory that cooperation does not mean that individuals have to set aside their differences; rather, they need to learn how to unite and blend their intrinsic differences into a new and harmonious whole. This then is the real meaning of *shalom*, the authentic version of *salaam*...that those with various types of differences can choose to strive for a harmonious *Gestalt* in which the whole is truly greater and different than the sum of the parts.

The same philosophy is a part of the Barenboim-Said Foundation's statement of why they continue to support musical projects:

While music will obviously not solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, it does play a role in bringing people together and allowing them to get to know one another. The only political aspect that permeates the Workshop is the understanding that there is no military solution to the conflict.

We can only hope that this message will continue to be repeated until more people begin to see that, instead of waiting for solutions that do not exist, we need to be seeking and enacting ones that do.